# Summary workshop Documenting Digital Art : Documenting Net Art 16.06.2020,
Summary by Manique Hendricks

The workshop Documenting net art : untitledinternet.com (2012) by Constant Dullaart & Documenting Mouchette (1996 - now) by Martine Neddam by Mila van der Weide (Assistant Conservation and Documentation, LIMA) & Patricia Black (Research Intern, LIMA). Moderated by Gaby Wijers (Director, LIMA).

In June 2020, LIMA prepares to continue its Conversation on Preservation programme online, recognizing the need for connections and exchanges. Documentation — a work's physical remnant or trace —is created and used in different ways, depending on its use, perspective and timing. In performance and digital art, documentation has become the focus of conservation and presentation strategies. What can be learned from other practices within and outside of the scope of the museum? This series of workshops is part of the collaborative project Documenting Digital Art, initiated and coordinated by the University of Exeter.
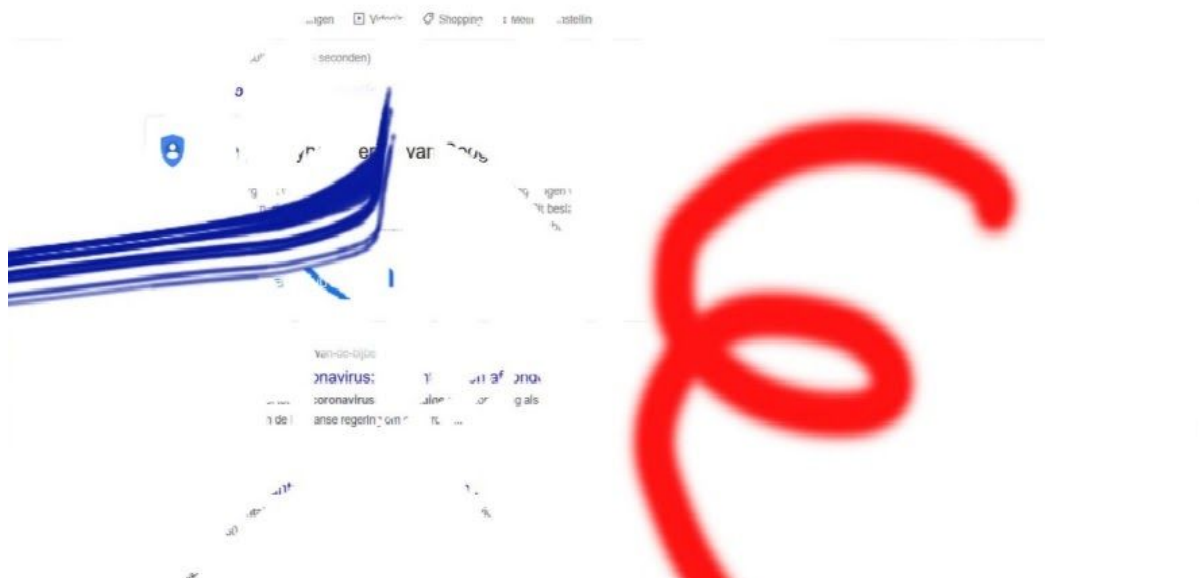
Mila van der Weide, untitledinternet.com (2012) by Constant Dullaart
untitledinternet.com is a net art piece by Constant Dullaart which the artist describes as a 'performative collage'. The website displays a Google startpage with a particular look, as it is overlayed by a filter that partly obscures the web page. The search function is thereby fully maintained, allowing the user to browse the internet through this customized search engine. Each time the user reloads the page, a new filter appears, and retrieved information is partly erased by distinct brushstrokes, pen scratches or airbrush doodles. As such, the artist provides a tool or context, and the user - as well as the server - creates collages with this context through the act of browsing. By obscuring the search giant's web page, while simultaneously turning the entire internet into a painted collage, untitledinternet.com is a comment on the 'neutrality' of

Google and its hidden algorithms that structure information. The work depends heavily on Google and its censoring power, both technically as well as conceptually. Considering the rapid changes in (internet) technologies, as well as Google's safety measurements, adapting the work is inevitable to keep it online functioning. The domain name, artwork files and the source code that together make up the work (server side) are stored at LIMA, in a system of virtual servers called ArtHost https://www.li-ma.nl/lima/article/arthost. For the browserside we aim collaborate with Rhizome.

For untitledinternet.com, as well as for other web-based works that are preserved in ArtHost, we create a video documentation in which the work itself, the interactivity as well as the artist reflecting on (the functionality of) his work are captured. This approach was inspired by the Dullaart-Sakrowski method, a documentation method for net art in which the use of split screen video image is used as a way to move beyond documenting merely technical specifications and interactivity but also emphasizes the 'reception situation'.
In LIMA's video documentation the idea of the splitscreen was adopted, and the artist is filmed while interacting with the work, reflecting on its future, on its concept, as well as on the creation process. The viewer can follow the artist's browsing and the work's behaviour by means of a screen recording. In preparation, a list of questions was sent to the artist. As opposed to a classical interview with an interviewer and interviewee, we chose to have the artist tell us about the artwork in his own way.

Has the work been shown in an exhibition context, and has information on the exhibition been added to the documentation?
The exhibition history of the work is part of the case study report. This work was shown as screen shots. I find it very interesting that the way that it is exhibited in a gallery context is quite different from when you would see the work online, as the whole interactivity is not necessarily there. So Dullaart or a curator might do a search in advance for the exhibition display, that image would be put on display. The performance is there but it has been done in advance. At the same time, the server is always live performing.

What kind of documentation do we need now and in the future to understand the work, how the work functions or functioned? In what ways is the way in which the work remains important to the artist?
Dullaart is quite flexible in that. It's important for him but he mentions that it could be a screen recording of a browsing session through this work. Or it could be those screenshots.
We also want to make a whole mind map, when a work is seen as the work, or when it will be seen as documentation, when the artist has to be contacted, when things are possible to fix etc. But it's very complex and open for multiple interpretations. Also Dullaart is very involved, we can always consult him now in this moment. LIMA has been working with him for years, which is a great benefit, but it would be good to think about possible future moments in which he wouldn't be available for any reason..

How can we improve on common practice?

Was the project ArtHost by LIMA considered as documentation or the contrary of documentation: live and working?
The project is not finished. What was referred to was the first steps of the projects, and testing with different websites. We thought the websites were rather simple, but then there were some on the Google blacklist. Complexity-wise these were not the most extreme cases. The next step that we started with the development of Arthost is more participatory works and I think Patricia can continue from here.

ArtHost was not originally/intentionally made for documentation but for hosting the artwork. So all the backup of all the files, source codes, documentation, domain names are backed up and monitored. If we want to exhibit this work in the future we need to have the documentation and the parameters to do so. Documentation was not the first aim, but keeping the work alive is the first aim, facilitating the backup and storing of the work.

What is missing in our documentation?
The mapping is not done yet. Also the screen recording of a browsing session that could function as documentation, could replace the work when the work is not accessible for instance. We didn't do that yet. For some of the other Google works Dullaart has already sent a screen recording. Dullaart made a very useful timeline that you can find on his website, from his first google works until now. He lists all the developments there. You can see the links between the works and their Google dependency is made concrete

What do we need to know about the experience of this work by different audiences?
We didn't focus too much on this aspect. The audience participation has a different role I would say in Mouchette I would say, for Dullaarts work it's basically a tool that the user can work with. What I think is important there is that maybe the work is conceptual, like the experienced user would figure out quite easily what to do with it, but for someone with no experience with net art the work needs context. In that sense the video shows its functionality.

What should we remember about the work? How can we take the work into the future through documentation?
In the case of Dullaart's work: it's the concept that should be remembered about it, that he attempted to comment or reflect on a sort of global power player of our time in a playful way and giving the user in a way information back through this customized lense. For this work the artist's intentions are documented in the video.

Documenting Mouchette (1996 - now) by Martine Neddam by Patricia Black (Research Intern, LIMA)

"Mouchette" (1996) is a collaborative net art performance from the Amsterdam based artist Martine Neddam. Presented as an interactive website, the ongoing platform evoques the online presence and rather subversive diary of a young character named Mouchette, a 13 year old girl who likes to express herself around themes like death, desire and suicide. Online for more than 20 years, mouchette.org disclosed a very private and playful universe, mainly consisting of image/text compositions that leads the user to multiple narratives. The language mainly consists of image/text compositions that leads to multiple narratives. Entering the first page, you can have many paths of interaction, which include a menu bar, hypertext words, hidden links, flash animations, as well as iconic web questionnaires made by the character. Most of all, actions include doing what Mouchette tells you to do: "Kill that cat", "Put your cheek on the monitor", "Help me", "Answer me", "Browse me".

The website presents a lot of documentation and preservation challenges, since it contains a combination of different elements and it's highly participatory. During its existence, it incorporated several side projects, as live performances and installations. The artist sees it as a performative brand, which means that rather than the main web artwork, her character also expands itself through other projects and media. This makes its documentation not only more complex, but also more sensible if we really want to understand its essence and reflections on time in a more profound and integrated way. "Mouchette" is then provided by a documentation based on memory, events and places, rather than just one static artwork. Also, the website has a quite complex structure, containing several interactive pages, more than 3.000 active links and an ever growing text database. Technically, the work grew in a very free, flexible and organic system during the years. Because of that, it's very hard to map it in an objective way, as also to document it in a static point of view.

The old programming and aesthetics it's also one of its conceptual essence, which makes technical updates not so simple as a choice. To clean it, or organize too much, could also be a

way of killing what makes Mouchette what she is. Since the main maintenance it's being done by the artist, all the knowledge of how to preserve the website has a very personal approach. During the years, this process had to be part of the artist's routine and life. Flexibility, re-creation, interaction and collaboration are the main factors for this artwork. Therefore documentation should always care for its mutable ecology.

What are the problems in documenting digital art? How can you maintain and express / show / present the aesthetically importance of the code in the documentation?
During my research it was interesting to find insights brought by art historian Katja Kwastek pointing to the need of a more diversified taxonomy for describing interactive artworks. Today the vocabulary used in forms for funds applications, festivals, museums catalogs, case study reports are mainly focused on technical values, and not really include other perspectives, as the aesthetical one. Mouchette is essentially an identity, therefore everything that builds this identity is important to be preserved and documented. Although this identity is being brought up by a virtual dispositive, Mouchette is a lot about a constant aesthetic choice that decides all the elements of how/when/why to create a story and how this story will communicate with others. Developing new vocabularies to describe interactivity would not only clarify technical values to be later reproduced in a more objective way, but also those aetetchical intentions of the work.

How does audience-generated documentation become part of the documentation of the work?
There's different ways of dealing with audience participation for Mouchette. In the most obvious way, because the audience has such an active role and its constantly co-producing the artwork, its documentation could bring a lot for its preservation and understandment, in many different ways of analysis. Nevertheless, we didn't work on audience documentation so far. The other perspective is that Mouchette is already documenting and archiving its audience participation somehow. Designed to work as a stage and an archive at the same time, the website is continuously gathering its own audience feedback and putting them into collective analyses through its database. The written answers published in the section "Suicide Kit for Christmas" or "Lullaby for a Dead Fly", for example, represents diverse aspects of audience participation. Feedback can show some shy curiosity, like testing the mechanism with small interactions and words, or even intense testimonials. They can vary from sad, honest, violent to funny approaches. Some can look real, and others dramaticized characters exploring their own fake personas. Either way, the outcome of Mouchette's experience is there to be seen: online, available and following its own documentation timeline. Taking this in consideration, we could open another kind of question: could that be considered a document of the artwork for itself or not?

What can we learn from the documentation and preservation of performance?
Gabriella Giannachi reminds us how documentation of performance tends to look at performance much less as an object and much more as relation between different elements of a system, like artist, viewers, space and time. This ends up showing a need of taking in consideration different levels of 'representation' in a documentation, which makes a lot of sense for Mouchette, since the artwork is precisely about this kaleidoscope that crosses multiple forms (fiction/reality), times (over 20 years) and spaces (physical/virtual). Also, if we consider Mouchette is constantly changing, performance documentation can remind us that the artwork

will also be reinterpreted and therefore differently documented over time. This could allow us to capture the relationship not only between artist and work, or artist and public, but also among different versions or interpretations of the work over time.

What are the different monitoring parameters of ArtHost for these two web-based works are they the same or do they differ?
There are many different manners to document change over time. The most annoying thing is that you have to interpret changes, what kind of actions should be taken. For Mouchette we used mapping, putting a system in place that we would use on a regular basis, we would use new mapping and would see how things evolve. Also working on a warning system, that if links are broken immediately a message comes to LIMA to work on it.

What is missing in our documentation?
Partly because of the reason Martine Neddam is a teacher and researcher, she has always shared and discussed a lot of information about her own work, therefore there's a lot of information available for investigation. This is something important to be underlined. Over its 20 years of existence, the work has been reflected in many conferences, academic books, catalogues or expositions, making the artist's intention always contextualized in new moments and net art scenarios. Neddam has also created a parallel weblog that gives support to the preservation and documentation of Mouchette, gathering all kinds of material related to the work like articles, interviews, news and academic researches. Considering all this information, something that might be missing is more precise exhibition history details. Something that can tell us what is Mouchette outside the website format, how this affected the work, what does it says about the work over time and what is important to be documented for the future.

What is meant by 'old versions' of mouchette.org? When does something become 'old'?
Technically speaking, Mouchette was first created with another domain (*www.xs4all.nl/~mouche*) and grew from several PHP versions of programming and updates during the years. Nevertheless, Neddam uses these "old versions" of Mouchette to reveal even more of her character and her story, just like any other element in the artwork. For example, after the rewrite of the section "Lullaby for a Dead Fly" from Flash to HTML5, a small note in the corner of the screen let the user know that the animation has suffered a change in its original programming. Another one is the use of sounds like awnings, screams and groans that at the time were linked to the long waiting of page's renders - which now happens pretty fast but even thought were kept. This all draws attention of users to the fast technological changes within the work and its media and gives them a perpetual new relation to the story told. The concept of "generative preservation" created by the artist itself, also gives some light about this imprecise idea of "old" when it comes to net art. For her, Mouchette is never reflected in terms of an "original", but a "origin", making impossible the "old", but only the "different from before". The origin instead of the original makes it pretty clear that "old" isn't just not relevant for the work, but in fact deconstructed.

Has LIMA ever considered a more narrative or written approach taken to document Mouchette's identity? What would this be like?

It works a lot with the idea of a documentation being something that is not static, it's an interpretation of the work. So I think in this way it makes sense that maybe this is also including some narrative and aesthetical thinking. How someone, a curator or a researcher is interpetting that work at the moment makes a lot of sense for Mouchette.

With the acquisition of the work into a collection, will there be a "handover" of roles, for example who will be doing maintenance in the future? Are there changes being done to the code as well, and if so, are they logged in some kind of version control?
Gaby Wijers: Does the museum maintain the work? Or are you, Martine, as an artist, still keeping the role in maintaining the work?

What they have acquired is a version, they haven't acquired mouchette.org. They acquired mouchette.org/version01, all the data until a certain date with a timestamp. All they have is data, it's not on a server. Since that time the data has stopped. Since that time I have upgraded to a new version of php, I have been cleaning etc. If you put online that version many things wouldn't work anymore. So you would have to revive the whole environment (php or server software). They also have acquired the right to present it, which means that they are dependent on my online version. We're considering possibilities of a proposal to exhibit the work, everything is possible. You can call it an old version, I would call it a time stamped version. The work is very dependent on the time when it is made. It's not possible to acquire Mouchette as such, because nobody knows how to maintain it yet, I am the only one who knows how to maintain it and it changes all the time.

To what extent can documentation really "replace" the work if it doesn't function as anticipated anymore?

Sometimes, maybe often, documentation is what remains, and in that way takes over the visuals of the work. Think of performance documentation for example, where maybe originally it was seen as documentation, over time evolved into the work. Also there is a time again that this documentation to reinterpret, or reinstall the works. To make new versions of the work. This is always a super interesting question.

It's quite characteristic how things went in performance studies. We have noticed that as a phenomenon this started to become more manifest in the late 80s and 90s while the reenactment started to become a genre that started to be popular.

In the book that Jonah and I edited we found that that included a wide range of documents, original journal magazine publications to empherma from works like wall paper or objects that were used in the work. The question within this context would be; what could then be the documents that could become the artwork in the future? If so? What can we do to look after those documents that we will call the work? In performance studies the line between documentation and artwork became very thin.

We had conversations with Dullaart if emulation could become the work? What is the stadium that the work should be replaced? When is it not the work anymore? What's the line? What kind of documentation would we need for that? That's an ongoing part of our research.

How do you see the value of documentation, for instance in the case of the Stedelijk whose version doesn't really work anymore but they still have the documentation, would this be enough for a replacement - and if so, what does this say about the value (art historical and financial) of the work? How do you see the difference coming up all of a sudden between what is left as documentation and what is left of the work (that is not the work anymore). What is the value then of the work and of the documentation?

The acquisition of the work raised a lot of questions. At some point I didn't want to go through with it, but what pulled me over was the open endedness of the situation. There will be questions, and we will find answers. If not me, someone else will and this is what I like. Naming things documentation or the work; generative preservation/conservation, I wouldn't be bothered to make the distinction. LIMA has another position of someone external, because they don't position themselves as the author. As the author i say: it's all the same, i don't want to make the difference. Also hoping that a lot of this agency could be taken in the future, if things have to be redone in a certain way, to be more truthful to the spirit rather than to preserve the actual material/code/things in a hard way. And change it to fit the spirit of the work, rather than the code, or hard material. In that sense, everything could become the work of art itself.

Then, would you perhaps consider that more of a curatorial decision and not as a conservational decision? It's about the intentions of the work and the context.

I think conservation is curation. Even for the fact that the Stedelijk owns something that is not in state of showing it means that every decision of presentation is curation, whether it's made by me, by them or by whoever. The curation part and even the artistic/recreation part is meant to be preservation.

What should we remember about the work? How can we take the work into the future through documentation?

It was very interesting what Martine said because that's how I feel the work, during the time I was researching it, it's really about the intention. As I said before, Mouchette is about an identity, and everything that helps us remember what this identity is about and everything that makes it possible to remain alive and evolving, just as a person would, will be the right way to look at its documentation for the future. Mouchette has its own subtleties, past, history, it has a way of communicating and responding. And this all growns, changes, as we all do.

How did we document this intention?

In a way what we are doing is already a way of documenting, because we are discussing it, it's really good. There is a lot of discussion about what is the intention, what mouchette means, what it is in a social perspective. This is already being done in a way. Martine herself is always speaking a lot about the work. This is really good for maintaining this intention and always renewing its discussion.